

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# James Law: He Helped Establish a University and Founded a Veterinary College, Part II

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
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The breakthrough for James Law and his veterinary program at Cornell came in 1894 when he and the university president, Jacob Gould Schurman, successfully convinced the New York State legislature to provide resources for the veterinary college. In the most unusual administrative coup, the publicly-funded college was to be administered by the private institution, Cornell University. Law assembled a faculty of six (including himself) and accepted the first class of students in 1896. Enrollment grew rapidly and by the turn of the century the class size was reaching ten to twenty students per year.<sup>1</sup>



*James Law (bottom row, center) and the first faculty of the New York Veterinary College, 1896*  
(Photo by Cornell University)

One of the greatest threats to his new college was from within Cornell. In 1903, Liberty Hyde Bailey, dean of agriculture, proposed to President Schurman that veterinary medicine should be absorbed by the agricultural college. As often occurs in academic politics, hostile takeovers are justified by sophistic arguments of efficiency and economy. In this case, Bailey additionally argued that the merger would be consistent with the federal government's model of animal health as part of agriculture.

Law was a temperate man but not without conviction, and he articulated his views in sweeping detail, leaving no doubt how he felt about Bailey's proposed takeover. He opened his written defense for the continued autonomy of his college by declaring that "Veterinary Medicine is closely allied to the Medicine of man; *not to agriculture*. As well make medicine subsidiary to agriculture, manufacturing, engineering, mining, etc... No veterinary college has been successfully conducted, nor conducted at all, as subsidiary to a college of agriculture."<sup>2</sup>

This proclamation, which has served as a guide for deans and faculties to the present, was vintage James Law. Twenty-five years earlier, he had reported to the Pennsylvania Board of Agriculture, arguing the virtues of what we now call One Medicine or One Health. "Now that veterinary medicine has been established on a scientific basis, the time has come when the bonds that unite the students and practitioners of human and veterinary medicine should be knit more closely, and the two branches be brought into more intimate relationship."<sup>3</sup>

The issue of the merger lay unresolved for five years until, at the time of Law's retirement in 1908, the Board of Trustees voted to reject Bailey's takeover attempt and veterinary medicine continued its trajectory as a separate college.<sup>4</sup>

Returning to Law as a university builder, perhaps the greatest tribute was given by A.D. White in his 1905 autobiography. White was opining on the great difficulties the university had in establishing a college of agriculture, and how critical Law, the veterinarian, had been in buttressing the programs of the university as they went through several attempts to recruit a worthy professor of agriculture.<sup>5</sup>

*And with special gratitude should be named Dr. James Law of the British Royal Veterinary College, whom I had found in London, and called to our veterinary professorship. Never was there a more happy selection. From that day to this, thirty-six years, he has been a tower of strength to the university and has rendered incalculable service to the State and Nation. His quiet, thorough work impressed every one most favorably. The rudest of the surrounding farmers learned more and more to regard him with respect and admiration, and the State has recently recognized his services by establishing in connection with the university a State veterinary college under his control.*

If James Law had a blind spot, it was his unwillingness to accept the critical importance of functioning within an urban setting. Both Montreal-based Duncan McEachran and New York City-based Alexandre Liautard urged Law to consider moving the veterinary college to a more populous site. In a magnanimous gesture that perhaps presaged his own return to Europe, Liautard even generously suggested New York. Similarly, when the concept of a state-supported college was floated in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Law and his successor, Veranus Moore, vigorously fought it. For a man who had argued strongly in his earlier days for a national policy for veterinary medicine, he unfortunately took a position on the wrong side of medicine on this issue. The breadth of Cornell's potential impact in veterinary medicine has been constrained by that short-sightedness.

Some will argue that this is overly harsh criticism, and perhaps it is. But none will disagree that Law was a giant among giants in the early days of North American veterinary medicine. True to his personality and his passion, his foremost achievement was probably as a teacher, and his greatest legacy was in the accomplishments of his students. Beyond the scope of this story, students such as Daniel Salmon, Theobald Smith, Cooper Curtis, and others, will occupy space in a future posting.

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<sup>1</sup> The length of the curriculum was established as three years, and did not return to four years for another two decades.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard, Ellis P. *In the James Law Tradition 1908-1848*. (Ithaca, New York: New York State College of Veterinary Medicine, 1982), 1-15.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard, Ellis P. *A Cornell Heritage. Veterinary Medicine 1868-1908*. (Ithaca, New York: New York State College of Veterinary Medicine, 1979). 125.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> White, Andrew Dickson. *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White. Volume I*. (New York: The DeVinne Press, 1905), 369.

#### KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine  
Cornell University  
Andrew Dickson White  
Ezra Cornell  
James Law  
Duncan McEachran  
Andrew Smith  
Alexandre Liautard  
One Health

#### TOPIC:

Cornell University

#### LEADING QUESTION:

Why did the dean of Agriculture at Cornell want to take over the veterinary college?

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he

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spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.